

“Cross-language speech perception: Late versus early second-language bilinguals”

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Language experience systematically "tunes up" our perception and production of speech, at both the segmental and lexical level. Perceptual attunement to the native language (L1) is evident quite early, well before the end of the infant's first year, and continues to be refined up into adulthood. The primary benefit of this attunement is that it optimizes the speed and accuracy of word recognition in the native language. However, it also has a well-known drawback: L1 attunement places severe limits on adults' perceptual sensitivity to the consonant and vowel contrasts of other languages that deviate phonologically and/or phonetically from native segments and contrasts. These perceptual constraints are especially obvious in adults who are completely naïve to the language of the target stimuli. However, L1 perceptual biases are also striking in the perception of many non-native L2 segmental contrasts by late-onset (post-puberty) second language (L2) learners, whose speech perception and comprehension are hindered not only during the initial phase of L2 acquisition but even after years of L2 use. Moreover, this L1 perceptual bias appears to contribute substantially to L1-accented production of L2 words, even in speakers with years of L2 experience. At the same time, however, it is important to note that certain non-native contrasts nonetheless remain quite easy for naïve and late-L2 listeners to perceive and/or learn. Moreover, interestingly, certain perception and production biases are evident as well even in early sequential bilinguals (L1 from birth, L2 from early childhood), and may differ between those early bilinguals for whom the L1 remains dominant versus those for whom the L2 has become their dominant language, as is true for the 2nd and 3rd generations of many immigrant communities around the world. This talk will consider theories and empirical findings on perceptual learning of L2 speech contrasts by both early bilinguals and late L2 learners, particularly with respect to the wide variations in degree of difficulty for perceiving and learning different types of non-native contrasts. This presentation will address how the Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) and other models of L2 speech acquisition including PAM-L2 (Best & Tyler, 2007) can provide a foundation to further probe the factors that may affect speech perception and production in late L2 learners and early sequential bilinguals in similar versus different ways.